

# **“Open the Gates Mek We Repatriate”: Caribbean Slavery, Constructivism and Hermeneutic Tensions**

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## **Introduction**

At various intervals throughout the year in Jamaica, members of the Rastafari faith gather around a bonfire and reason on their continued captivity in Babylon. These “Nyahbinghi Groundation” sessions are punctuated by testimonies, songs, chants and drumming. Here is an extract of one popular chant, *Open the Gates*:

Open the gates mek we [let us] repatriate  
JAH JAH open the gates mek we repatriate  
Oh JAH Rastafari, Oh Selah

Our forefathers were taken away  
Our forefathers were taken away  
Oh JAH Rastafari, Oh Selah

InI must go home a Ithiopia land [We must go home to Ethiopia/Africa]  
InI must go home a Ithiopia land  
Oh JAH Rastafari, Oh Selah

JAH JAH see wha Babylon a do we down ya [God sees what Babylon does to us in this land]  
JAH JAH see wha Babylon a do we down ya  
Oh Rastafari, Oh Selah

Babylon ge we basket fe go carry water [Babylon makes us undertake hard labor]  
Babylon ge we basket fe go carry water  
Oh Rastafari, Oh Selah ...

(Ras Ivi Tafari 1993)

This Nyahbinghi chant expresses some core truths held by the Rastafari faith. For Rastafari, the practice of slavery was not abolished but transmuted because, as descendants of enslaved Africans, they have yet to be repatriated back to the lands of their forebears and instead continue to perform the same back-breaking and ill-compensated work in the Americas. What is more, this continued captivity is fundamentally unjust and therefore a moral indictment on the Western (Babylon) system. Present-day bondage, for Rastafari, is not a metaphor (as in “wage slavery”), rather, it is a term used to make a critical truth claim on a historical condition that has yet to be properly alleviated spiritually, psychically, socially and (geo-)politically.

Such living testimonials are at odds with the interpretive significance that constructivists in IR attribute to the abolition of Atlantic slavery. Constructivists have mobilized the debate amongst historians over the moral versus economic determinates of the end of the Atlantic slave trade so as to argue for the importance of norms (rather than interests) in transforming the rules of

international conduct (see for example, Ray 1989; Crawford 2002; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Klotz 2002). Certainly, few constructivists have held the abolitionist moment in an entirely utopian regard. Some have noted the prime concern by abolitionists for domestic moral reform as well as their paternalism towards the enslaved; others have pointed to the ensuing ironies wherein Britain mobilized its naval surveillance of the Atlantic to promote its own economic interests (Kaufmann and Pape 1999; Keck and Sikkink 1998, 78; De Nevers 2007). Neta Crawford (2002) makes perhaps the deepest critique of the triumphal interpretation of abolitionism by suggesting that its associated humanitarian norms were implicated in subsequent colonial ventures by European powers. Such qualifications have been elucidated acutely in recent historical studies that link past and present anti-slavery projects (see especially Quirk 2011). And yet it remains the case that constructivists in IR overwhelmingly represent the abolitionist project as a decisive and progressive transformation in international norms from practices of legal bondage to human rights.

Why are there such discrepancies between constructivist scholars and some of the living descendants of enslaved Africans over the meaning of abolition and its significance for emancipation? I use this question to tease out a fundamental tension in the constructivist project in IR, a tension, moreover, that resides more broadly in the “sociology of knowledge” tradition to which constructivism is in good part indebted.

Constructivism, to follow the definition of the influential sociologist Peter Berger (1992, 2), starts with the ontological proposition that all social reality is interpreted reality, and because all social reality is interpreted all social beings therefore interpret. Such a strong ontological proposition implies a radically democratic enfranchisement of the act of interpretation itself. At the same time, however, this proposition brings up the specter of relativism for constructivists whose prime agenda in IR has been to make hermeneutics (i.e. the practice and study of interpretation) epistemologically acceptable to a field dominated by positivist and objectivist philosophies of social science. As a number of post-structural critiques have variously pointed out (Edkins, Persram, and Pin-Fat 1999; Zehfuss 2002; Epstein 2011), most self-proclaimed constructivists do not wish to dismiss the basic criteria of validation that are common-sense to positivist/objectivist philosophies. Rather, they wish to broaden and deepen the kinds of inquiry that might inform such criteria. To this end, constructivists must affirm that it is possible – and even desirable – that social scientists can arrive at a superior interpretation of reality to those who directly inhabit it. In this respect, a fundamental tension is created between the strong hermeneutical proposition that all social beings interpret their reality and the epistemological qualification that some social beings can provide a superior interpretation of the reality of others.

This tension is not a new discovery, and it has consistently informed the debate over relativist versus universalist modes of social inquiry (see for example, Wilson 1970). For the purposes of this article, however, I will not dwell on the relativist/universalist debate but rather upon the politics of knowledge production, specifically, the relationship between the scholar and her/his collection of “scientific” knowledge, and the “object” of inquiry and the cultivation and enactment of her/his “everyday” / “lay” knowledge. It is precisely this relationship that ties constructivism to the sociology of knowledge tradition. Indeed, within the first few pages of their influential book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Thomas Luckman (1966, 9) identify the importance of the “father” of sociology of knowledge, Karl Mannheim, in his engagement with the problematique of “everyday” knowledge. However, in recent years the problematic relationship between “scientific” and “lay” interpretations of social reality has been most popularly interrogated through Anthony Giddens’ notion of the “double hermeneutic”. A critical examination of this term facilitates an evaluation of the political implications of the hermeneutical tension described above, namely, that one group in an interpretive relationship has the power to de-value the explanations of another group’s experiences by deeming them to be insufficiently “scientific”. This is the aim of my contribution to the forum.

In search of a global sociology John Holmwood has recently challenged social scientists to humble their *a priori* claim to possess a superior interpretive faculty by transforming their engagement with those whom inhabit the social phenomena under investigation. He argues that sociologists must accord to “the principle of generosity (in our interpretations of what they are doing) and of symmetry (if they can learn from us, we can learn from them)” (Holmwood 2009). This challenge is directed to the sociology of knowledge tradition; however, it holds significant implications for constructivists in IR to the extent that their enterprise owes a debt to this tradition. Additionally, Holmwood’s challenge directly implicates the politics of knowledge production that I have outlined above and prompts, I would suggest, an engagement with a decolonial methodology of interpretation. In this article I mobilize these concerns to undertake a critique of constructivism in IR. Specifically, I focus on the significance of abolition and the non-engagement by constructivists with the alternative interpretations arising out of the “lay” knowledge of enslaved Africans and some of their legally emancipated descendants.

I proceed firstly by exploring the tension in Giddens’s notion of the “double hermeneutic”. I then contextualize this tension as part of a deeper political project of knowledge production that the sociology of knowledge tradition is complicit in, specifically, the ideological construction of a difference that separates humanity into the knowers and the known. I explicate this construction as part of an episteme that maps the supposed distinction between “moderns” (as knowers) and “traditionals” (as known) onto socio-cultural groups - the colonizers and colonized. And I suggest that constructivism in IR has yet to critically engage with its own complicity in this project of colonial-modern knowledge production. Then, in light of the tendency to use abolition as a key case study, I challenge constructivists in IR to engage, in Holmwood’s sense, with the understandings of abolition and emancipation that variously inhere in the social reality of descendants of enslaved Africans. For this purpose I mobilize a decolonial methodology. In particular, I use the work of Jamaican sociologist and author Erna Brodber to point towards paths that might cut through the hermeneutic tension inherited by constructivism.

### **The tensions of the double hermeneutic**

Befitting the strong ontological statement that all social reality is interpreted reality Giddens admits a radical equality in the relationship between lay and social scientific modes of interpretation. For example, he (1977, 172) proclaims that social science cannot claim access to a “morally separate or transcendently neutral metalanguage”, and that hermeneutics is not the “privileged reserve” of the professional social investigator but practiced by everyone in the generation of descriptions of social life. Giddens (1987, 70) even admits that social scientists do not have to interpret the meaning of the social world to lay persons who inhabit it, because the latter part-influence its meanings. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that social science is “parasitical” upon lay concepts which “obstinately intrude into the technical discourse of social science” (Giddens 1987, 70, 20). However, Giddens also notes that this interpretive influence is duplex, that is to say, that sometimes the “second-order” concepts developed by social scientists can in turn part-constitute the observed reality by influencing “first-order” (i.e. lay) concepts (1987, 48; 1984, 284). This “dialogical model” is what Giddens has in mind when he coins the term, “double hermeneutic”. It is also why he claims that social theory must be *critical* theory, i.e. a pursuit of knowledge production that is self-aware of the transformative effects (good or bad) that it has on its object of inquiry (Giddens 1987, 71; Giddens 1977, 28).

Implicit yet unavoidable in Giddens’s doubling of the hermeneutic is an epistemological qualification that is fundamentally necessary for claiming sociology to be a practice that produces *distinctive* knowledge of social reality. Giddens uses Jürgen Habermas’s typology of communicate action (see for example 1984, 284) to identify lay knowledge as either “technical” (i.e. cause and effect explanations of phenomena) or “practical” (i.e. communicative interaction that facilitates day-

to-day encounters). Alternatively, Giddens reserves Habermas's "emancipatory" mode of knowledge production which requires a higher level of self-reflexivity only for the social scientist. It is the activities of this particular interpretive agent which requires a critical self-reflexivity on the very practice of interpretation itself. Hence, due to these criteria, Giddens gives social scientists a special "communication" role by introducing frames of meaning from one social context into others (1984, 285). Social scientific interpretations of reality, because critical, are therefore assumed to be more mobile and hence more universalisable than particular context-specific and technical-practical "lay" interpretations.

Such claims do not logically arise out of the basic ontological proposition of hermeneutics. Rather, as I shall now argue, they arise out of an ideology of modernity, that is, a belief in the historical uniqueness of the modern condition, which underpins the sociology of knowledge tradition. Mannheim (1936, 12–13) believed that the modern condition was historically unique to the extent that its mode of understanding was no longer based on dogma or esoteric knowledge but from "analysis of the knowing subject". For Mannheim, Enlightenment had dissolved religious worldviews so that "to determine the nature and the value of the human cognitive act [now required finding] an anchorage for objective existence in the knowing subject." In other words, for Mannheim the novelty of the modern condition lay in a never ending and ongoing self-reflexivity; hence, the very *requirement* for a double hermeneutic – i.e. the creation of a discrete scholastic group of interpreters – would necessarily emerge from the exigencies of the modern condition.

Berger and Luckman affirm this assertion. They too make a distinction between traditional and modern societies. The former are characterized by a simple division of labor that requires specialisms only in the Habermasian forms of "technical" or "practical" knowledge. Alternatively, modern societies are composed of a complex division of labor that differentiates institutions such that a specialization in "pure theory" can emerge. And with the emergence of this "relatively autonomous sub-universe of meaning" such theory "has the capacity to act back upon the collectivity that produced it" such that it is both a social product and a factor in social change (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 79–81). In later reflections on their influential book, Berger (1992, 2) reiterates that modernization is a phenomena of empirical institutional change *and* of cognitive transformations, and that it was this duality that social constructivism was, in the first instance, meant to explain.

I submit, then, that the "double hermeneutic" should be understood as a legitimating device, necessitated by an ideological belief in the uniqueness of the modern condition in distinction to tradition, by which social scientists can occupy an intellectual space reserved for "superior" interpretation that was traditionally occupied by a priestly caste.<sup>1</sup> In Foucault's terms, this institutional space supports the modern *episteme*, an apparatus of "scientificity" that separates out statements that can be considered as "scientific" from those that cannot (Foucault 1980, 197). The requirements for occupying this space can further be fleshed out by reference to Pierre Bourdieu's explanation of the "scholastic point of view". Those who work through this view, argues Bourdieu (1998, 128), enjoy the economic and social privilege of partaking in a "mental experience that is an end in and of itself" and not one that is directly bound to "lay" concerns. Hence scholastic practices are legitimized by the degree to which they can claim to be context-free, thus mobile and universalistic, thus "scientifically" plausible and even independently verifiable. Yet ultimately, it is institutional privilege and not a superior interpretivist science that, for Bourdieu (1998, 135), "confers upon a happy few the monopoly over the universal".

To summarize the argument so far: a tension exists between the ontological proposition that all social beings interpret reality and epistemological claims that some social beings possess a

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<sup>1</sup> See the famous statement of this belief in Immanuel Kant's (1991) answer to the question, "*What is Enlightenment*"?

superior hermeneutic faculty through which to interpret the reality of others. This tension constitutes the notion of a “double hermeneutic”, itself a legitimating device for a scholastic episteme that exists to institutionally discipline the very practice of interpreting social reality. The double hermeneutic is thus demanded by a belief in the uniqueness of the modern condition, an ideology that facilitates the institutional replacement of a priestly caste with a scholarly one.

I would now like to push this line of thought further and relate it to a body of critique that examines how the Western academy has institutionally upheld and justified the *colonial inflection* of modernity in the field of knowledge production (see Mato 2011). As Barry Hindess (2007) points out, the articulation of a fundamental difference between tradition/modernity has always operated historically, i.e. by differentiating old and new European Western societies, *and* at the same time synchronically, i.e. by differentiating the colonized from the colonizing. Furthermore, as Sandra Harding (2008) argues, such a mapping of difference works through race, gender and class coordinates so that the “poor” living in the West, as well as wives/mothers intersect with (post-)colonized subjects to form the “traditional”. This heterodox array of subjects is homogenized under the colonial-modern gaze into the “object” of inquiry (see also Mohanty 1984). The “othering” nature of colonial discourse – and its inflection in academic divisions of knowledge production – has been rigorously examined in postcolonial studies (Spivak 1999). Explicating the importance of this postcolonial critique vis-à-vis constructivism will allow me to demonstrate, in the next section, how the decolonial methodology used by Erna Brodber can address the problem of the double hermeneutic.

The mapping of colonial difference was crucial to the formation of social anthropology, a field of study wherein sociology and anthropology – disciplines originally charged with engaging modern/colonizing and traditional/colonized societies respectively – overlap. In his famous essay on the “native’s point of view”, Clifford Geertz sets up a now familiar distinction between experience-near (i.e. first-order) and experience-distant (second-order) concepts. The former (such as “love”) define the lived experience of the “native”, the later (such as “object cathexis”) are used by “specialists of one sort or another – an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer, even a priest or an ideologist ... to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims” (Geertz 1979, 226–227; in general see Lie 2013, 210–212). Here, Geertz suggests the possibility that “natives” might have their own hermeneutic specialists and this would infer that the distance between traditional and modern societies might not be so distant. However, soon afterwards, Geertz reapplies the distinction between modern and traditional, knower and known, theory producer and data provider: ultimately, the study of native cultures is not, for Geertz (1979, 227–228), in order to achieve an “inner correspondence of spirit with your informants” but rather “to figure out what the devil they think they are up to.”<sup>2</sup> So while Geertz confirms that natives do interpret reality, this reality must be re-interpreted by anthropologists if it is to possess adequate explanatory value (see also Shilliam 2013a).

Similar processes reside in the most influential attempt to adapt the anthropological method of ethnography for sociological analysis, namely, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss’s (1999) “grounded theory”. The purpose of grounded theory is to defer use of existent “experience-distant” concepts and to build, instead, explanatory frameworks from the ground up by utilizing the “experience-near” categories garnered inductively in the interaction between the social scientist and the lay peoples who inhabit the social world that requires elucidation. Ostensibly, such a strategy would seem to undermine the privileged episteme of social science and thus address the tension of the double hermeneutic. Nevertheless, as David Rennie (2000) notes, Glaser and Strauss fall short of challenging the positivist reliance upon verification, so that the categories produced from grounded theory can only be accepted as explanatory when they are tested by deductive hypotheses that do

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<sup>2</sup> For an extended critique of anthropology along these lines see (AUTHOR)

not similarly arise out of the social world that the scientists have interacted with.<sup>3</sup> Wanda Vrastri (2008) has recently raised cognate criticisms over the use of ethnographic methods in IR.<sup>4</sup>

In sum, the tension of the “double hermeneutic” is made necessary by – and suffused most deeply in – a colonial-modern difference that must separate humanity into the knowers and the known. This interpretative superiority is institutionalized in the scholarly episteme of the Western academy, manifest in the requirement of the double hermeneutic. My point here is less to do with making an empirical claim about similarities or differences between traditional and modern knowledge structures, but to question the terms of distinction themselves. Specially, I am concerned with exposing the colonial complicity of the double hermeneutic not so much within socio-culturally ascribed groups but in the very act of constructing their temporal and ontological difference. To repeat, the justification for this differentiation does not arise logically out of the basic ontological proposition of its hermeneutical tradition, which instead ascribes a radical equality to the practice of interpretation across humanity. The effect of the tension that I have explicated is to silence “lay” interpretations of “lay” reality. To finish this section I will now focus on a couple of constructivist works in IR that most directly address the methodological implications of the argument I have been making.<sup>5</sup>

Vincent Pouliot criticizes scholars who presume to occupy a “god-like position” when it comes to their interpretive ability. Alternatively, Pouliot argues that the constructivist should first use induction (especially via “grounded theory”) to recover subjective meanings, then “objectify” these meanings in their inter-subjective context and finally historicize them. Pouliot (2007, 365, 368) maps this process onto a continuum marked by one pole, “subjective knowledge” (Geertz’s experience-near concepts) and the other pole, “objectified knowledge” (experience-distance concepts). Pouliot’s astute use of Bourdieu’s critique of the scholastic view has potential to attend to the hermeneutic tension resident in the sociology of knowledge tradition. However, Pouliot’s methodological orientation ultimately reproduces the moves made by Giddens as well as Glasner and Strauss in that, by the very use of the poles of experience-near and –far concepts, it depicts a “lay” world of interpreters who cannot interpret themselves adequately, while there is a scholastic caste who occupy a privileged episteme that allows for more valid interpretation of phenomena. While it may appear trite to point out, it is nevertheless telling (considering the argument made above), that when Pouliot discusses contested interpretations he only dwells upon the theoretical differences held amongst the scholastic caste; and this practice is common in the constructivist literature (Pouliot 2007, 360; Klotz and Lynch 2007, 12; Finnemore and Sikkink 2001, 397). Epistemic challenges to this caste mounted by “lay” intellectuals or groups are absent, or at best briefly mentioned but never followed up, and I shall return to this point shortly.

Audie Klotz and Cecelia Lynch’s wide ranging text on constructivist methodology goes the furthest in directly confronting the tensions residing in double hermeneutics. Like Pouliot, they embrace ethnography and participant observation in the constructivist research agenda and clearly state that such practices must be accompanied with “an appreciation of people as subjects rather than objects of research” (Klotz and Lynch 2007, 58). This is an important qualification of the tendency by constructivists to write a “diffusionist” history of the socialization of international norms (for critiques see Epstein 2012; MacKenzie and Sesay 2012). Nevertheless, sustained engagement with the ramifications of this crucial observation is constantly deferred in Klotz and Lynch’s book so that their argument never critically reassesses the very requirement for a double hermeneutic in the first place. I would argue that a similar attenuation of critique is evident in pragmatist approaches to interpretation, although there are, again, potentialities in the literature

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<sup>3</sup> For an innovative use of grounded theory in IR that addresses some of these issues see (Henry 2011).

<sup>4</sup> And in Anthropology see the ground breaking work of Richard Price (1990).

<sup>5</sup> Certainly, there are many other methodological treatises by constructivists, but they do not directly address my concerns (for example, Lupovici 2009).

that could be productively enabled.<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that, so far, feminists in IR have engaged with this methodological issue much more comprehensively than constructivists (for example, Sylvester 1994).<sup>7</sup>

Certainly, methodological debates in constructivism are more promising in addressing the tensions in the double hermeneutic than the growing attempts to extract an explicit normative agenda from constructivist scholarship. There are many problems within this evolving literature (Weber 2013), especially, in light of the current argument, with regards to the underappreciated complicity of the defense of ethics with the operation of colonial rule (Epstein 2012). But in terms of the present argument it is important to remember Giddens' claim that social theory is necessarily critical theory, and that this claim is necessitated by legitimizing the scholastic episteme as superior in its self-reflexivity to that of its "lay" counterparts. In other words, it is to be wholly expected that moral considerations would be value-added to interpretative activities that, in a colonial-modern episteme, are considered to be hermeneutically superior and thus endowed with emancipatory agency. Again, it is necessary to point out the significant lack of direct and sustained engagement with the "lay" world and its social beings as sources of moral and political philosophy. True, Richard Price (2008, 213) alludes to the possibility of, for example, asking the intervened upon how they might judge intervention; yet he quickly returns the focus to arguments *between* academics over the legitimacy of various contesting voices. Likewise, and to return to the constructivist literature on abolition, there are only brief gestures towards the significance of the narratives and moral philosophies of the enslaved *themselves* (Klotz 2002, 59; Crawford 2002, 169; Keck and Sikkink 1998, 78).

These silences cannot be justified by reference to the core ontological proposition that underpins constructivism: *all reality is interpreted reality – all interpret*. It is time to directly confront the tension caused by doubling the hermeneutic. Erna Brodber will show us how to decolonize hermeneutics.

### **The hermeneutics of Erna Brodber's "Blackspace"**

The term hermeneutics references Hermes, the messenger of the gods in Greek mythology who was long ago sundered from his ancient referents in the service of the ideology of modernity. But Hermes was never the only messenger. As Clinton Hutton (2007) explains, African-Caribbean cosmologies generally place a prime importance upon the trickster/messenger in their pantheon of spiritual agencies, a figure who often manifests as Papa Legba. And rather than the politics of the scholarly caste and its episteme, the African-Caribbean hermeneutic tradition takes the politics of emancipation as its substantive reference point.

In order to protect against their dehumanization, Africans who made the Atlantic crossing variously mobilized the deities they knew to intercede on their behalf in the new plantation world. By this means they would connect their enslaved bodies to their still-free African ancestors and spiritual agencies. This connectivity required the linking of profane with esoteric knowledge and thus proceeded through creative modes of expression, such as dance, drumming and song. So while these activities were belittled by European commentators as savage, heathen and superstitious, they nevertheless provided the spiritual-psychical-social resources to survive slavery and even contest it politically through maroonage, rebellions and revolutions.<sup>8</sup> The Nyahbinghi Groundation continues this tradition amongst the descendants of enslaved Africans, and if the names of the divinities have

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<sup>6</sup> My preference would be to start with (West 1989).

<sup>7</sup> My thanks to Megan Mackenzie for this suggestion.

<sup>8</sup> On African spiritual retentions in the Caribbean more generally see (Warner-Lewis 2003, 138–198; Stewart 2004).

changed, the purpose of the intercession - to “open the gates mek we repatriate” - remains. It is in this tradition that I place the scholarship of Erna Brodber.

Brodber originally trained as a sociologist at the University of West Indies at a time when Black Power demands were being made upon the newly independent institute of higher education to incorporate the histories and experiences of the impoverished African-Jamaican peoples into its curricula (Roberts 2006, 16). Of African-Jamaican heritage herself, Brodber came to the realization that sociology (and its data-mine, history) could not help in this pursuit to the extent that ruling conventions demanded putative objectivity and detachment in the scholarly process, mainly through a focus on European thought and history (1990, 165). Breaking from this colonially-induced scholastic episteme to honor the closer African-Caribbean hermeneutic that I have described above, Brodber argues that to feel attached is “not to commit the academic sin of distorting. It is to claim your psychological space.” It means, she suggests, to stop seeing “slaves” and to see instead “enslaved persons” (1997a, 74). I submit that this cognitive shift is at the heart of decolonial methodology.

This suggestion prompts a short discussion of the relationship between subaltern studies, postcolonial studies and a decolonial methodology. In many ways Antonio Gramsci’s notion of the “organic intellectual” resonates with my critique of double hermeneutics to the extent that, rather than claiming a distinct and singular position for the scholarly caste, Gramsci attributes the rise of intellectuals to the functional requisites of classes or population strata that come to occupy particular places within the societal division of labor. And yet, for Gramsci (1971, 5–7), some strata – especially the peasantry - seem to be incapable of developing their own intellectuals because in the very moment of their formation as intellectuals they cease to be “organic” to that stratum. Moreover, Gramsci makes this qualification despite the fact that, outside of the domain of knowledge production, he expects that some subaltern groups will exhibit political agency (see Green 2011). Hence Gramsci still leaves space for the practice of double hermeneutics to be applied to groups that are coded as subalterns.

Subaltern studies have engaged with these issues over the last thirty years, first attempting to provide the subaltern with a voice and subsequently addressing the problem that the subaltern is always already represented – and silenced - by the master discourse (Guha 1983; Chakrabarty 2002). While subaltern studies, a crucial battleground for postcolonial studies, effectively critiques the interpretive limits of the scholastic episteme it does so only to then limit inquiry *within and of that episteme itself* (Prakash 1994). In this respect, and consequentially similar to Gramsci’s argument, subaltern studies critiques, yet tacitly enables the double hermeneutic to the extent that it disavows the cultivation of adequate knowledge of the “lay” world through an engagement with “lay” hermeneutics.

Nevertheless, to follow Brodber’s decolonial interjection, subalterns rarely cultivate knowledge of their condition as subalterns, but as persons who have been subjected to oppression and inequality and are attempting to creatively survive or even transform these conditions. “Slaves” inhabit the colonial archives in terms of objects that produce x amount of sugar per year, who die by x percent each year, who are bought and sold for x dollars per year; yet the organic intellectuals of enslaved peoples, contra Gramsci, encode their own experience in terms of being, for example, Black, Kongo, Africans, pan-Africans, sufferers, Israelites in bondage, even Ethiopians (see for example C. R. Price 2003; Shilliam 2013b). And in making this shift – a decolonial move from subaltern slaves to enslaved persons - the intellectual becomes in the first instance accountable not to academic peers but to their research/researched community (Brodber 1990, 166; see also Smith 1999). Brodber’s own sense of accountability is to a Pan-African constituency that understands emancipation to be an “uncompleted task” (1997a, 70). Brodber (1990, 164) thereby hopes that her intellectual work can operate as “a tool with which the blacks and particularly those of the Diaspora



will forge a closer unity and, thus fused, be able to face the rest of the world more confidently". Her focus, in this respect, is to critically retrieve and further substantiate the ways in which the Diaspora have mobilized the resources inherited from their African descendants to creatively address and suture their conditions of enslavement in the Americas (see Brodber 1990, 168).

Brodber seems to have had to fundamentally question the scholastic episteme in the course of undertaking a large oral history project documenting the lives and memories of elder non-elite Jamaicans. She was struck by the desire of her interlocutors to talk of a past that was passionately associated with Africa, Atlantic slavery and the Jamaican Pan-Africanist, Marcus Garvey (Brodber 1985, 53). One person spoke forcefully of the replacement, after independence in 1962, of the holiday marking Emancipation Day with that of Independence Day (the later occurring one week after the former). For Brodber this remembrance stood as a critique of the continued official efforts, even in the postcolonial era, to de-emphasize "Africanisms" and erase references to slavery (Brodber 1985, 54). These oral histories constitute a hermeneutic tradition that is not only silenced by the powerful but also by the privileging of the written word in the colonial archives.<sup>9</sup>

In this respect, a decolonial methodology requires a sensibility towards structures of gender (Lugones 2010). Brodber belongs to a generation of predominantly women Caribbean writers who do not despair at the absence of black male presence in the public realm dominated by white-colonial males. Redolent of Sandra Harding's critique of the colonial-modern gaze, Brodber works in the sites disavowed by the public sphere and disparaged as "lay" but where oral accounts reside – i.e. within the politics of domesticity, familial relationships, folk lore, healing arts and spirit work (Roberts 2006, 5–6, 33, 59). She (1990, 168) seeks to listen to those silenced voices, the "unlettered", domestic servants, stevedores, cane-cutters and minstrels. As I have suggested, while the work that the enslaved performed is often referred to in the colonial archives, this is not the case when it comes to their thoughts and feelings, the "emotional reality" of this work. So for Brodber (1983, 7) the retrieval of these hermeneutics must, by necessity, be creative: "where, if not in the imagination of the creative writers, will we find the admissible data on the behavior of people who left no memoirs?" However, such creativity must be guided by a sense of the living transmission and creative iteration of past heritages. And in order to cultivate this sensibility one must enter "the minds and hearts of the ancestors through the children and grandchildren and so extend the boundaries of the search for sources to include oral accounts" (1983, 7).

Brodber's intellectual work therefore utilizes a methodology that disavows the interpretive privileging of second-order/experience-distant concepts. Even participant *observation* is inadequate because Brodber must creatively situate herself as a subject in/of her research. In this respect, a key innovation that Brodber had to foster during her training of social workers at university was to incorporate her "I" into her work, to present this placement in such a way that her students would see their own "I" in the work, and at the same time to provide the space for the subject audience to "do their own dreaming, own thinking, planning" (Brodber 1990, 166). Such concerns prompted a turn to fiction writing, which, Brodber (1990, 164; 1983, 4) maintains, is part of her sociological method. Her first novel was *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, originally written as a case study for her social work students and not meant for a public audience (Brodber 1990, 166). Later, *Myal* was written for teachers, and then *Louisiana* for anthropologists (Roberts 2006, 31). I submit that her last novel, *The Rainmaker's Mistake*, is written, in part, for historians.

There are consistent tropes that span Brodber's novels. First and foremost is the sickness that colonialism and slavery introduced into the spirit, psyche and social relations of the enslaved, to be inherited by their descendants. This sickness is caused by a racial order that segregates peoples, values and expectations through a Manichean manner that relates all good to whiteness/Europe and

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Ricoeur (1981, 44) notes how written language is a privileged in most European hermeneutical traditions.

all evil to blackness/Africa. This racial order condenses at the micro-level of interaction through the clumping together of different colors, habitations, education, class, religion and language (see Brodber 1998, 72). For example, to be light-skinned or white, to speak heavy patois and attend an African-Baptist rather than an Anglican church is to be out of place and thus to court madness. To be black, a heavy patois speaker and attend an African-Baptist church is to court superstition and backwardness, but nevertheless, to behave as expected. Brodber's characters negotiate this Manichean racial order: some seek to uphold it, some accidentally transgress it and some purposefully subvert it. Most importantly, there is always a sense within these dramas of a personal spiritual, psychical, and geographical going away from (usually enacted by a female character) but then communal redemption of and return to African-Caribbean ancestral resources with which to heal the colonial slaveholding past and realize emancipation more fully in the present.

Brodber's prose elides linear and progressive timelines such as those often used by constructivists to present a before and after of slavery. Instead, the slaving past is alive and brought inside the present because the ancestors and spirits of the past have personhood and exercise agency in the here and now. Furthermore, Brodber does not start by translating the folk hermeneutic that she is working in into a "neutral" language, and neither does she explicate it over the course of the novel via experience-distant concepts. Rather, the reader must build an intimate relationship with her hermeneutic and struggle to work interpretively within it because the very meaning of the story is immanent to that hermeneutic. In this respect, the prose has a pedagogical function with regards to interpretation in that it outlaws a doubling of the hermeneutic as a mode of gaining superior insight. Instead, knowledge cultivation of an already interpreted reality must be garnered through an empathetic and principled co-relationship with the community intellectuals, their alternative archives and living knowledge traditions.

In fact, in both *Jane and Louisa* (1980) and *Louisiana* (1997b) the story directly implicates the scholastic episteme in the colonial illness that must be healed. In *Jane and Louisa*,<sup>10</sup> (a somewhat autobiographical novel), the key protagonist, Nellie, sojourns in the United States for education and, after having experienced segregation, returns to Jamaica. Continuing her studies in Kingston, and keen to actively address the racism she has witnessed in the USA, she joins a study group on campus that seeks to explicate the plight of the black masses through second order/experience-distant concepts that belong to Marxist philosophy. A ramification of choosing this interpretive strategy, Nellie admits, is that "we have unfortunately to make a distinction between them and us. Those people throw dice, slam dominoes and give-laugh-for-peasoup all day long" (Brodber 1980, 51). Yet Nellie finds no personal solace within her elite scholarly caste. Occasionally the group tries to recruit from the masses, and one such person, Baba, turns out to be a childhood friend. Baba, however, is also a Rastaman versed in the African-Caribbean traditions of healing. He refuses to be enthralled and humbled by the scholastic episteme of the study group, and instead spends his hours there constructing an obeah doll (obeah refers to spiritual sciences). In his final attendance, Baba gives the doll to Nellie and it promptly crumbles. The meaning is not lost on the group members: "we should stop hiding and talk about ourselves" (Brodber 1980, 61). Subsequently, it is from Baba's care that Nellie finds a way to apprehend the African-Caribbean folk resources that were always around her and immanent within her own familial relations, spiritual and material. Having crossed from a double hermeneutic over to a living knowledge tradition, Nellie is now ready to do her critical part in completing emancipation.

In the introduction I stipulated that I would focus on the politics of knowledge production rather than the problem of relativism/universalism. However, it might be useful at this point to briefly consider whether Nellie's "crossing over" represents a relativization of knowledge and an

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<sup>10</sup> Space rules out an engagement with *Louisiana* but the novel is just as instructive in challenging the double hermeneutic.

essentialization of identity. I would strongly argue that Brodber's hermeneutic, rather than relativist, is an ethically, politically and intellectual engaged attempt to decolonize the cultivation of knowledge of the lifeworlds of descendants of enslaved Africans. This project has general political and intellectual implications; however, its pursuit might produce different affects and effects on participants/interlocutors who engage with the project from different positionalities. For example, with regards to the history that she has written of her own village, Woodside, Brodber maintains that the core audience is the inhabitants of the village whom she wishes to link to their enslaved ancestors so as to give present generations "a sense that we are part of a process from slavery to freedom and [that] will lend us a greater measure of responsibility" (Brodber 1999, i). Brodber also hopes that other Jamaicans and peoples of the African Diaspora might "read and will feel the process with us in Woodside". And beyond that, she hopes that this history will provide "a clearer view of us" to those who might not share the heritage of African enslavement (1999, i).

Brodber's insistence on personally situating oneself in hermeneutic work does not mean that she essentializes identity. Rather, for Brodber the relationship between identity and experience-near meanings is necessarily creative in that identification requires a personal investment in the pursuit of meaning. Asking the question "who is black?", Brodber responds; "we see that our definition of our phenotypical and social colour lies in our *determination*. It is not the social scientist's definition. It is what *you* see in the mirror" (Brodber 1997a, 74, my emphasis). In this respect, Brodber's hermeneutic also allows an entry point even for those who might not see black in the mirror, so long as they are similarly determined to relate to the inferred lifeworlds, as Holmwood suggests, with symmetry, generosity and humility. With her fictional writings yet to be embraced by sociologists, Brodber has effectively relocated her intellectual work from the university to her village, Woodside; and around each Emancipation Day, she has been turning her home into a "Blackspace". Brodber articulates the hermeneutic of Blackspace by addressing those "who see black in the mirror" thus:

Can you join with the little tradition not to study it, not to report on it but to reason *with it* in a *shared-learning mode*, and help to build the myths, the ideologies, the religious and political philosophy that will make us what this tradition thinks it can be – the light of the world, the salt of the earth, that can help us to be ... self-directed souls (1997a, 80 italics added).

In the Blackspace held at Woodside in 2010 we reasoned on emancipation as an uncompleted task. The immediate political context was a recently-ended state of emergency wherein state security forces had launched an all-out offensive against a poor black urban neighborhood, Tivoli Gardens. Known as a "garrison" community, the "don" of Tivoli Gardens, Christopher "Dudus" Coke, had been charged in the United States with international drug and gun running and, under diplomatic pressure, the Jamaican prime minister – and representative for Kingston West, an area that incorporates Tivoli – launched the bloody offensive to extricate Dudus. The Caribbean has always been integrated into global circuits of capital movement. In many ways, present day illicit activities are the new global circuits that have replaced the plantation economies. What both circuits share is a fundamental de-humanization of the peoples of the Caribbean in the global pursuit of super-profits. Previously known as Back-o-Wall, the area that was violently cleared out between 1963 and 1965 for the construction of Tivoli Gardens had once been a stronghold of the Rastafari faith (see Hall 2010). So at Blackspace we imagined what an alternative system of living in dignity and sacred community would look like for those whose ancestors were never given (and are still disallowed) the space to reconstruct their social environment upon legal emancipation.

### **By way of conclusion: slavery after abolition**

The 1807 Act of Parliament that abolished the British slave trade simultaneously created a new category of African migrant. "Liberated Africans" - also termed "Recaptives" - were those peoples seized by the navy as "goods or merchandize unlawfully imported" and who were "forfeited

to his Majesty". This act of liberation was extremely ambiguous because these people were still effectively categorized as forfeited commodities, even if now freed from their prior captors (Adderley 2006, 2–3). Over the next half century, of the 100,000 "liberated" Africans, 31,000 - 40,000 ended up in the British Caribbean (Adderley 2006, 3; Schuler 1980, 2). Some were routed through way-stations in St Helena, others through the mixed-constitution courts in Brazil and Cuba, but most were taken first to Sierra Leone where the majority who could not prove economic independence were then given the "choice" to enlist in the colonial army or be shipped out to the Caribbean as indentured laborers (see, in general, Asiegbu 1969; Schuler 1980) .

The arrival of African Recaptives in Jamaica spans the moments between planters experiencing a diminution of their labor force post-emancipation and the concentrated turn to Indian indentured labor migration in the late 1850s. Already weakened from their prior enslavement, mortality rates of Recaptives on the re-crossing were only one quarter less than the middle passages of the eighteenth century (Shlomowitz 1996, 36–37). Moreover, the conditions that greeted Recaptives were on the whole barely better than those of slavery days. Planters could not afford a living wage and ended up substituting bare necessities for wages. Reports of flogging were common. True, Recaptives were indentured for a fixed term only. However, upon release from their exploitation, only a tiny percentage had the financial resources or opportunity to return to African coasts. In this sense, Recaptives had to deal with the same challenges of survival as their legally emancipated neighbors (Schuler 1980, 9, 51–58).

There had been a common belief held amongst diverse peoples of Central Africa – a region heavily represented by the Recaptive population - that spiritual work targeted at the collective welfare/healing was good but that the private practice of it for individual gain was sorcery (Warner-Lewis 2003, 139–140). Hence, it was commonly believed during the high-era of Atlantic slavery that Europeans were sorcerers, and fear of enslavement was often articulated as a fear of being eaten by whites. Even in the era of *de jure* emancipation there are stories that the same fear gripped Recaptives when they laid eyes on Caribbean shores. (Schuler 1980, 27–28). This demonstrates that the interpretation of slavery by captives held consistent *across* the legal "rupture" of abolition and emancipation. Thus the identity developed by the Central African Recaptives of Jamaica was built on the hermeneutical refusal to rupture the Americas from Africa and enslavement from freedom.

One variant of this practice survives today through the ritualized practice of ancestor worship known as Kumina. Kumina communities tend to categorize their members not as Jamaicans, Afro-Jamaicans or Blacks but as Africans (Stewart 2004, 144). Coming of age in the Kumina community is termed "coming up in the African world", and community leaders, who are usually priests or "scientists" (that is, recognized experts of spiritual-herbal healing), term their vocation as "African work" (Schuler 1980, 65, 76). The most frequent Kumina ritual is the memorial ceremony wherein adherents - singing and dancing to expert drummers - are "ridden" by the ancestral spirits. The most important songs in these rituals are composed in clearly recognizable Central African languages (Schuler 1980, 76–77; Bilby and Bunseki 1983, 65–97). Testimony from a celebrated Kumina Queen, Imogene Kennedy, refers to African languages being acquired from elders but also from the "old arrivants" themselves who often dispense such esoteric knowledge to their descendants under cotton trees (Warner-Lewis 1977, 61).

Kumina rituals are designed to heal sickness and imbalance by interpreting life events through a deep sense of community continuity, a sense that is eviscerated from standard histories of Atlantic crossings, abolitionism and political independence (see Warner-Lewis 1977, 77). One could say, then, that the gravity of the Kumina hermeneutic centers upon the "collective memory, grief, and indignation regarding African people's capture, exile, enslavement, and oppression by ... White supremacists" (Stewart 2004, 145). Over the last forty years of reasoning between intellectual workers and Kumina elders, the latter have regularly given accounts of their own ancestors' journeys

to Jamaica. And the testimonials often triangulate in some detail with written historical accounts of the interception of slave ships by the British and the “recruitment” of Recaptives as indentured laborers in Jamaica. But while these social facts can be “verified” the more important point is that post-abolition Atlantic crossings are overwhelmingly interpreted by Kumina elders as the *beginning* of the *enslavement* of their African ancestors (Stewart 2004, 145–148; Warner-Lewis 1977, 60; Lewin 2000, 257; Bilby and Bunseki 1983, 17–20).

Constructivist scholarship on abolition has been overwhelmingly silent on the fate of Recaptives<sup>11</sup>. A remembrance of their fate would certainly complicate the Whiggish narrative evident in most (but not all) constructivist scholarship. Nevertheless, my final provocation lies elsewhere: I want to remember the profoundly hermeneutical constitution of this silence. Can the meanings of freedom that are popularly signified by “abolition” really be adequate if they have silenced the meanings mobilized by descendants of enslaved Africans in their ongoing struggle for spiritual, psychical and substantive emancipation (Bhambra 2010)? The authority of international law can feel very distant to sufferers. And *all* reality is *interpreted* reality – all interpret. Pouliot confidently states as common sense that to twenty-first century minds “witchcraft” is “impenetrable” (2007, 36). To whose minds, precisely? In what distant, rarified, priestly episteme?

The languages, rituals and hermeneutic of Kumina were one of a number incorporated into the Rastafari faith from its inception in the 1930s, and Kumina drumming was subsequently adapted in the 1950s, in areas such as Back-o-Wall, to become a central pillar of Nyahbinghi Groundations (Bilby and Leib 1985). One Kumina song from the mid nineteenth century remonstrates, “Alas, alas, Kongo / Oh, where we were born, there let us go” (Schuler 1980, 74); Rastafari agitates in the present day to “Open the gates mek we repatriate”. These remonstrations and agitations must be interpreted primarily through the hermeneutics of the descendants of enslaved Africans: they are not metaphors, nor rhetorical devices, but critical truth claims. In order to appreciate the political implications of these claims the scholar must try to relate to these epistemic communities and interpretive universes in ways other than taking the high ground of the double hermeneutic, ways that foster (in Holmwood’s terms) symmetry, generosity and humility. Despite the dominant constructivist interpretation of abolition, the ills of slavery remain, bondage persists, and emancipation is still being struggled for. That should mean something to academics who utilize the history of Atlantic slavery to evidence the transformative power of identity and norms. Those born into that struggle do their part; we must all of us do ours.

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<sup>11</sup> Kaufmann and Pape (1999, 659) briefly mention the courts of mixed commission; Crawford (Crawford 2002, 161) does make an important allusion to the replacement of slavery with apprenticeship.

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